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ABSTRACT

Current literature on the three-year B.A. degree is reviewed as to its history, recent background, and anticipated problems (curriculum, finance, quality, and role of community colleges). The three-year degree dates back to 1640, when it was awarded at Harvard until about 1655. Three-year B.A. degrees received new impetus during the late 19th and early 20th century at Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Chicago, and Yale, as well as many other American colleges and universities. Recent interest in reducing the undergraduate program to three years is in programs that not only cut costs but also accelerate the educational process without loss of quality or content. Two programs that have proven most popular in attempts to shorten the length of the undergraduate program are the College Advanced Placement Program and the College Level Examination Program of the College Entrance Examination Board. The problem of curriculum is discussed from the viewpoints of educators and students. The extent to which three-year degree programs would alleviate the financial crisis in higher education remains to be determined. It appears that unless not only the degree requirements but also the over all enrollment are reduced financial savings will not be realized. As to the quality of education in a shortened program, it is felt that any three-year degree program that emphasizes further cutbacks in general education will widen the communications gap brought about by training in minute specialties. The suggestion that community colleges offer three-year degrees is said to have little merit, as such a program would change these institutions from their original purpose of meeting the educational needs of the community. It is concluded that thoughts of a three-year degree should be abandoned. (DB)

THE THREE-YEAR B.A.: A WAVERING IDEA

by

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October, 1972

Preface

In accord with the commitment of the University of Florida/Florida State University Center for State and Regional Leadership to make special studies available upon request to State Directors of Community Colleges, the W. K. Kellogg fellows as well as other graduate fellows prepare occasional papers on topics of current interest. This is one of those papers. Since there is a goodly amount of discussion being carried on at the present time regarding efficiency in higher education, the development of a three-year baccalaureate degree has been mentioned often.

Mr. Van Gelder, who has served in the admissions office of the University of Florida, has reviewed the current literature on the three-year B.A. degree and has prepared the following report. His conclusion is a good one which can be implemented in a way that would not interfere with current institutional organizational structure but on the other hand could offer to students an additional option in their progress toward a degree.

The expected tendency to provide a three-year B.A. degree by adding the "third" year to a community college associate degree program has been greeted with fear by many community college leaders. Fear that this emphasis would deter the sound development of comprehensiveness in the community college and would encourage misemphasis on the academic programs would appear to be a legitimate fear. However, the solution to the

question of accountability in the baccalaureate degree program would appear to be solved in a better manner through the conclusions outlined herein.

We welcome your comments and questions.

James L. Wattenbarger, Director
Institute of Higher Education

The purpose of this paper is to examine the idea of the three-year B.A. degree. For a number of reasons, the subject is currently receiving much attention but foremost because higher education is in financial difficulty. Budgets at most colleges and universities are shrinking, if not in an absolute sense, certainly in a relative sense. This development has college administrators "account" for every dollar that is spent and it has them justifying to legislatures and to the general public the merits of the programs on which the dollars are spent.

"Accountability" is the current "in" word. Within the realm of all this term stands for we find college officials taking a close look at higher education driven by the desire (necessity is probably a better word) to do "more" or to do "better" with less money. As a result of this scrutiny, the three-year B.A. program is receiving renewed attention as a possible solution to reducing the cost of higher education. To parents of college-bound youngsters the idea seems attractive since the cost of the degree would be reduced by 25 percent. The point of controversy is whether, at this reduced price, one "buys" a degree that reflects the same meaning and quality of the four-year degree.

Historical Notes

The attention given to the three-year B.A. degree manifests renewed interest because the idea itself is not new. From 1640 until about 1655, degree programs at Harvard were of a three-year duration; ironically, also a result of financial difficulties. Under the administration of Nathaniel Eaton, Harvard had fallen into such straits that the General

Court dismissed Eaton and closed the college for one year (1639-40) to investigate its financial affairs.[1] When Harvard reopened in 1640 under President Dunster, undergraduates were organized into three classes and were described as the first, second, and third "yeares."[2] Morison relates why Dunster adopted a three-year course for the B.A.

> On taking office in the late summer of 1640, he was given charge over the Class of 1642, which had suffered their freshman year (1638-39) under Eaton, and enjoyed the year when the College was closed (1639-40) under private tutelage. Dunster regarded these boys as junior sophisters in 1640-41, and they graduated in 1642. But for those who entered freshman in the fall of 1640, three years' continuous study for the B.A. unruffled by Eaton or by dispersal, were deemed sufficient. Hence the class were given their first degrees in 1643. . . . Having once established a three-year course, President Dunster found it difficult to extend the course to four years, as he felt must be done in order to keep Harvard College up to English university standards.[3]

Dunster knew that Harvard degrees would not command respect until four years were required for the B.A. Accordingly, in 1652 he presented an amendment to the College Laws, requiring a four-year residence for the first degree. As a result, several students who would have graduated in 1653 left the college because the Harvard Corporation made a law that the "Scholars should study at College four years before they commenced Batchelors in Arts."[4]

In more recent times, the three-year B.A. degree program received new impetus during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rudolph describes how on several campuses there appeared an acceleration movement in reaction to the ancient tradition of four collegiate years -- the "four-year fetish," as William Rainey Harper called it.[5] Already then, qualified students were being admitted directly from the better academies into the sophomore class at many colleges reflecting "...the

intelligent decision of the colleges, committed as they were to a set course of study, not to require a young man to repeat in college what he had just studied in school."[6]

Shortly after Johns Hopkins commenced with its undergraduate program in 1867, the normal time span for the baccalaureate degree was reduced from four to three years. Requiring one year of preliminary study at the university before matriculation, however, the decision was made in 1907 to return to the regular four-year program.[7] Another attempt to reduce the length of undergraduate study was at Columbia where President Butler developed the "professional option" plan. It permitted able students to enter Columbia's professional schools, except law, after two or three years of undergraduate study.[8] Similar programs were adopted at other universities. Chicago started a four-quarter system which permitted a student to set a faster pace for himself; Harvard advanced the idea of a three-year B.A. program for well-prepared and professionally motivated students; the B.S. program at Yale's Sheffield Scientific School followed a three-year course.[9]

Spurr reports that many American colleges and universities continued to offer similar options but that the percentage of students choosing to cut a year of their undergraduate experiences was never large.[10]

> ...despite many efforts to formalize a three-year baccalaureate program, and despite the fact that able students can readily accelerate and complete the baccalaureate today in three years through advanced placement and summer study, the American student by and large has opted for the four-year undergraduate experience. Where accelerated or shortened programs have been tried, faculty opposition has also generally contributed to their demise.[11]

The idea of a three-year B.A. did not generate sufficient interest among universities and their publics to take hold; college was too much

fun. "Under the circumstances, the colleges that had no intention of becoming universities (or had the misfortune to try and fail) committed themselves to the tradition of four leisurely college years, and the older universities assured their public that of course they had no intention of selling the Rennaissance ideal short."[12]

Recent Background

Times have changed since it was decided at Harvard, Johns Hopkins and other universities that the three-year degree program was not worth the effort. There is concern among some educators that too much time and money is being spent in earning undergraduate and graduate degrees. If this concern is based solely on the desire to meet the financial crisis in higher education, then, one may legitimately ask whether or not any of the current efforts are educationally sound.

A recent report listed a number of ways in which the new efforts to reduce the undergraduate program to three years is finding expression.[13] There is, of course, nothing novel in the plans of some colleges to obtain a baccalaureate degree in three years by "going straight through," i.e., by including two or more summer terms. Such a plan obviously does not reduce the number of requirements for the degree. Somewhat unique is the plan at Muskingum which grants students a discount on tuition for the summer term. This reduces the overall cost to the student somewhat while it helps the college to fill those half-empty classrooms characteristic of summer terms.

The real interest, however, is in programs which not only cut cost but accelerate the educational process. Such programs are based on the premise that the traditional college degree program can be condensed to

three years without losing either quality or content. Included in this idea is the notion that the high school experience can be reduced by at least one year for most students.

As early as 1903, there were those who were convinced of that. President Eliot in an address before the National Education Association stated:

> The American colleges have been peculiar in expecting so long a residence as four years. For the B.A. degree Oxford and Cambridge have required residence during only three years . . . Until recent years the American colleges doubtless needed four years because of the inadequacy of the secondary schools. These schools having steadily improved, and taken on themselves more and more of the preliminary training of well-educated youth, it is natural that the colleges should now be able to relinquish, without lowering their own standards, a portion of the time which they have heretofore claimed.[14]

Already then the argument was presented that there is nothing magical or imperative about four years of undergraduate work -- it had no natural relation to a course of study. Not everyone agreed. Andrew West, the former Dean of the Graduate School at Princeton, said that "the saving of a year or two in time and money will in many cases settle the question as to how extended an education a young man can get."[15] West's ideas about secondary education were not as confident as were Eliot's. "...with what imperfect training so many boys come from the schools, it may easily take four years to outflank their deficiencies, correct their methods, and develop even a semblance of liberal culture."[16]

At stake, also, was the question of the need for liberal education. West argued, not unlike others today, that liberal education, like political liberty, was always worth preserving and always in peril.[17] Speaking out strongly in behalf of liberal education, West believed that

> In the rush of American life it has stood as the quiet and convincing teacher of higher things. It has been preparing

young men for a better career in the world by withdrawing them a while from the world to cultivate their minds and hearts by contact with things intellectual and spiritual in a society devoted to those invisible things on which the abiding greatness of our life depends.[18]

To reduce undergraduate programs to three years by reducing liberal education seemed unthinkable to West. Some college studies, he believed, were essential for all students. Completion of those would open to the student the best all-round view of the knowledge most serviceable for whole afterlife. The ideas of discipline and duty, in studies as well as in conduct, underlie any real development of the one true freedom of the human spirit.[19]

What should be taught in college? How long should the length of the college course be? The debate goes on; the same questions form the focal points of discussion today. Grayson Kirk, former president of Columbia University, thought it to be a wry commentary on our colleges, presumably the incubators of progressive ideas, that they were operating on schedules geared to the seventeenth century.[20] He believed that "four years in some adolescent playpens that are called centers of learning may be a pleasant interlude for young people, but it is a luxury which they, their parents, the colleges and the country no longer can afford."[21]

The report, referred to earlier in this section, lists a number of other ways in which colleges and universities are attempting to shorten the length of the undergraduate program without reducing the requirements for the B.A. degree. Two of the most popular programs with nationwide appeal are those of the College Advanced Placement Program and the College Level Examination Program of the College Entrance Examination Board. To appreciate these programs, it should be recognized that the students

who enter college today, on the average, are different from their counterparts of two decades ago. They appear more knowledgeable, more "worldly." This is the generation that has been exposed to intellectual stimulation from sources other than the traditional ones. Television, films, paperback books -- these are but a few of the sources which appear to have given today's high school graduate a greater sophistication than his predecessor of some decades ago. Most important, too, are the changes that have taken place in academic subjects which not long ago were considered appropriate at the college level only. When it is implied (as was done by the Carnegie Commission in its recent report) that much of what transpires in the first year of college is duplicated effort, there is evidence to substantiate this.[22]

Consider the sizeable number of students who enter college with academic credits already earned through such avenues as the Advanced Placement Program and/or the College Level Examination Program. Some students receive credit for the entire freshman year. The College Level Examination Program (CLEP) is based on the premise that much of what a person knows has been acquired in nontraditional ways and it is becoming a popular way of certifying the extent to which high school programs have met the standards normally set for first year college students. The success of this program would seem to indicate that the transition from school to college may not be as difficult as some think it is. The Carnegie Commission has pointed out that as of 1971 as many as fifty thousand high school students received advanced standing in college and it expressed the belief that this figure could be expanded to 500,000.[23]

That times are changing may be noted in the attitudes of the young people, the social climate, the job market and in the traditions that have been uprooted. In general, high schools have been more responsive to these changes than colleges and universities. It is only now when higher education is in serious financial difficulty that efforts are made to clean the cobwebs out of the ivory towers. It is thus that a renewed interest in the three-year B.A. degree program as a possibility of not only reducing the cost of higher education but as a means to accelerate the process is finding expression in a variety of ways on the campuses of American colleges and universities.[24] A new college at the State University of Albany has been chosen to test combining the senior year of high school and the freshman year of college. Accelerated education is being explored by the state system of higher education in California where three separate projects stress the granting of degrees on the basis of competence shown in tests. Yale and Harvard (again) are studying the feasibility of the three-year B.A. program. At Yale, a committee is studying the merits of a lengthened academic year that would begin in early September and end in late June. Such a schedule would enable a student to obtain a bachelor's degree in three years.[25] The committee indicated that getting students through faster would allow the university to increase its enrollment -- and thus its income -- without bringing more students to the campus at any one time.[26]

A similar committee is studying a plan at New York University which would permit a student to earn the B.A. degree anywhere from three to six years. This plan would not only enable the student to begin his studies earlier or to receive credits while still in high school; it

would allow the student to "stop out" anywhere along the way for the purpose of work, travel, etc.[27] Many of the community colleges in the State of Florida have entered into arrangements with local high schools whereby high school seniors are permitted to enroll for academic programs at the college during their final school year. Upon completion of that year the student receives a high school diploma and one full year of college credit that is applicable toward the fulfillment of the A.A. degree. These credits may also be used for transfer to the state's senior university system.

Notwithstanding the accelerated pace with which such programs seem to be adopted by American colleges and universities, the debate concerning the pros and cons of these efforts goes on. In general, there is not too much opposition to the three-year B.A. program providing there is no reduction in the requirements of the degree. Granting credit on the basis of competency tests or for nontraditional studies is coming more in vogue. It is when proposals are made to change the undergraduate curriculum or to eliminate the "non-essentials" that voices are raised in strong protest.

ANTICIPATED PROBLEMS

Curriculum

What should be taught in college? In his book, The Higher Learning in America: A Reassessment, Paul Woodring advances a proposition which is neither motivated by a desire to cut cost nor by an interest in accelerating the educational process. Woodring takes the position that the standard four-year degree program contributes little to either academic specialization or liberal education. What is needed, he believes, is a program of liberal education designed "to broaden the student's horizon,

liberate him from the limitations of ignorance, prejudice, and provincialism." Such a program would not only provide the student with a richer life, it would prepare him for a wide variety of future vocations, the nature of which is not known at the present time. The program would cover a period of three years and upon successful completion, the student would be awarded a B.A. degree that would signify a liberal education and nothing else. No other undergraduate degree should be offered, in Woodring's view. The three-year B.A. degree in liberal education would form the basis for two additional years in a specialized field for those who are so interested.

The basic point is that by removing all professional training from the undergraduate program, it would be possible to grant the B.A. degree in three years, at the same time providing all students with twice as much time for liberal studies as is now available to them by being forced to select major and minor areas of concentration which, according to Woodring, is inadequate and unsatisfactory.

There is a touch of Veblen and Hutchins in what Woodring proposes. The university is seen as an intellectual retreat -- a community of scholars in which master and student search for "Truth" among the "great ideas" that have been passed along through the centuries from one generation to the next. Exposure to a strictly liberal education would form the foundation not only of specialized and professional training but would form a basis for common understanding among the members of a society. There is an implication here that this exposure to a strictly classical curriculum would give the student the kind of mental training that would carry over into other areas. It is a belief which prevailed at the

beginning of the present century and which, according to Oscar Handlin, to a large extent turned out to be a myth.[28] The power of reasoning in physics did not add to a man's ability to make judgments in politics.

There is something Utopian about Woodring's ideas and if they could be realized possibly they would form the answer to the assertion that our society is becoming a shambles for lack of general integrative wisdom.[29] The need today, it is stated, is for broadly educated citizens who can apply intelligence and interdisciplinary understanding to solve large-scale general problems.[30] It is rather characteristic of our society, however, that almost anything we undertake must have a utilitarian value. Education must lead to something that is visible and applicable. It is a value that has been internalized by the young men and women who come to college to become engineers, teachers, businessmen, etc. On these young people -- products of a pragmatic America -- Woodring's ideas may have little impact. The merits of a true liberal education are too often lost on a generation that simply is not ready to accept it. The problem of curriculum then is to be anticipated in any consideration of the three-year B.A. program. One argument is that if the student knows what he wants to study, he ought to be helped to achieve his goals without wasting time on peripheral or irrelevant fields. A state senator in Florida is alleged to have proposed a three-year B.A. degree for the entire university system of that state by cutting out the "non-essentials."[31] Such a proposal, of course, fires up the old debate as to what should be taught in college. The senator's proposal also raises questions: (1) What are non-essential courses, and (2) for whom are they non-essential? One can be reasonably sure that any reduction in the requirements for the

B.A. degree would be at the cost of liberal education. For one reason, general education includes many courses in many departments in contrast to the major program which is taken within a single department and as stated by Conklin, "we know that departments will be much more jealous in guarding their upper-level specialized territory than in guarding their lower-level survey courses."[32]

> There are no vested interests working to maintain power and high prestige for general education, while individual departments are, at many institutions, extremely strong political fiefdoms; hence, general education will be cut back far more readily than specialized education.[33]

Another reason general education would most likely pay the price of the three-year B.A. is because there really is little agreement as to what general education is. To be sure, most collegiate institutions require exposure to a "core curriculum" for the purpose of making certain that every graduate will have acquired the elements of a liberal education, that he will have made contact with the major fields of human endeavor and achievement, that he has been confronted with values and value judgments in these areas and that he will be acquainted with contemporary trends in his civilization but whatever the objectives under such goals, it is difficult to determine whether or not such objectives have been achieved -- let alone to "account" for such achievements within the realm of allotted budgets.

If the students are right in saying that too often higher education is "worn, irrelevant, hollow, and lacking in coherence," and if it is true that higher education is at present "largely an assortment of discrete and varying components" each "isolated from the other," then can we really afford to cut down on those forms of education which to the

members of as diversified a society as ours at least provide some semblance of common understanding? Or, in the words of Swarthmore's self-critique, "What, with the Bible forgotten, should be the common cultural possession of the educated American?"[34]

Finance

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education has asserted that by adopting a three-year B.A. program, providing young people with more options to earn college credits, and reducing the number of specialized degrees, operating expenditures for higher education could be reduced by ten to fifteen percent a year by 1980. This would amount to anywhere between $3 billion and $5 billion a year.[35] This forecast, if accurate, may sound like music to the ears of those who studied Earl Cheit's The New Depression in Higher Education.[36] Cheit reports that 54 percent of the nation's universities are in serious financial difficulty. The report points out that college income increased by 8.2 percent in the 1960s but that increases in salaries, student aid, research, and campus security when combined with inflation went up 7.9 percent. In January, 1971, the Association of American Colleges released the findings of a study that showed the total real deficits of private colleges were expected to amount to $370 million for the year 1970-71.

To what extent time-shortened degree programs would alleviate the financial crisis remains to be seen. It would appear that unless colleges and universities reduce not only the number of requirements for the degree but also the overall enrollment, one should not be overly optimistic about the savings that will be realized from a three-year degree program. The truth is that very few colleges and universities could

afford to reduce the size of their student population and remain solvent or at least at a level of financial status quo. Assuming, therefore, that most institutions will attempt to operate at as full a capacity as possibly, it is difficult to see where those savings will be realized. Whether a college "processes," let us say, 10,000 students in four years or 7,500 in three years, the relative cost of this "processing" should be about the same. And if the idea is to matriculate 10,000 students in three years, it is difficult to see where the savings will come from even with as much as one-fourth of the program eliminated. As long as it is necessary for a collegiate institution to operate at maximum capacity in order to meet its financial obligations, then, no matter for how long and in what manner students are enrolled and "educated," the investment in academic and peripheral work remains the same. To the student, a three-year program would present a savings; to the college, such a plan may not be all that lucrative.

Quality

As mentioned earlier in this paper, something has to give if a shortened degree program is not compensated for by credits earned for academic subjects in other traditional ways. To the student, the "price" of the degree has been lowered but what is it he gets in return? What is the competency value of the degree? As stated, what will most likely be given up are those college-wide requirements in specific courses or areas normally referred to as general education.

One thing about the American college is that it is so typically just that -- American. It has evolved out of the needs of the American society and its long record of usefulness to that society has been recorded well

by such scholars as Rudolph, Hofstadter and Smith. It has, historically, instilled in its graduates not only the importance of making a good living but above all of making a good life. Unfortunately, the American instinct for what is useful or practical has long since gained greater importance over and above the love of knowledge as a means toward a better life. Today's applicant for admission to college is asked to indicate his vocational interest; he is asked to declare whether he wishes to become an accountant, a schoolteacher, a chemist, and so on. With the heavy emphasis on the degree as a passport to employment, it is little wonder that interest in liberal education has fallen by the wayside and that with this occurrence, liberal education is slowly but surely losing the important place it once occupied in the curricula of American colleges.

With the advent of the knowledge explosion, graduates of colleges and universities have been "trained" in such minute specialties that communication among them becomes increasingly more difficult. Any three-year degree program that emphasizes further cutbacks in general education will widen the communications gap, will further delimit any semblance of common understanding. Any degree program that emphasizes efficiency in specialized training may well seriously handicap the development of broad educational leadership.

Such a three-year B.A. degree, obtained at a lower cost in money and educational effort, would be little more than a certificate of specialized training.

Community Colleges and the three-year B.A.

Paul Woodring and the Carnegie Commission have suggested that some of the "better" community colleges could be encouraged to offer the three-year B.A. degree.

Among the thoughtful ideas presented by both, this one undoubtedly has the least merit. To borrow a term from research, such a move might produce the effect of "regression," a shifting toward the middle of both community colleges and senior institutions. Both types of institutions would become more similar and both could vie in the baccalaureate syndrome which is the one thing that needs de-emphasis. For too many people, the objective is to acquire a degree, not what the degree stands for. The one bright spot that has appeared over the educational horizon in the past few decades has been the rise and growth of community colleges. These appear to be the only collegiate institutions which have realistically attempted to answer to the educational needs of the communities in which they are located. If now these institutions were to be induced to offer the three-year B.A. degree, undoubtedly attention and resources would shift to those programs with the greater "prestige" if only because it is human nature to do so. Such a shift might well destroy the concept of "service to the community," the idea that education is not for the "elite" only but should instead be made widely available to everyone according to his needs and his interests. The possibility of such destruction can only be deplored and any attempt in that direction should be strongly discouraged.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper the idea of the three-year B.A. degree has been examined. Attempts in that direction can be separated between those in which part of the requirements for the degree are fulfilled in ways other than the traditional ones and those in which portions of the requirements for the degree are eliminated.

Interest in these programs is stimulated by the necessity to meet the financial crisis with which higher education is confronted.

In the opinion of this writer, we should abandon all thoughts of a three-year degree as we should abandon similar thoughts about the four-year degree. A degree should represent certain competencies. This would, of course, require that among the members of the university community there is reached an agreement as to what "competencies" are deemed necessary for a degree. Such agreement should strike a balance between general and specialized education. Conklin believes that the best way to define the general education component of a competency-based B.A. degree would be through the appointment of scholars who have devoted professional study to the question of what constitutes general education.[37] Some of these people could be faculty members, administrators, and possibly even students.

Once agreement is reached, the manner, and to some degree the time, in which these competencies are acquired is of little competence. Greater recognition should be given to knowledge and skills gained through sources other than the formal education processes of colleges and universities. With independent study, advanced placement, and allowing credit for work outside the university, some students should be able to earn a B.A. degree in three years. On the other hand, if a student wishes to "stop out" on his way to a degree and assimilate his educational experiences with his life activities beyond the campus, it should be possible for him to do so. In all probability, his "total education" may very well become more meaningful even though it may take five or six years to complete the requirements for a degree. (This, of course, is excluding the possibility that such a student might receive credit for certain work or travel experiences).

In any case, a three-year degree to meet the financial crisis is not a solution if it means a devaluation of the competencies that such a degree certifies. But as a means to making higher education more relevant to the times, it has great possibilities.

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